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Sociology of Education's Cultural, Organizational, and Societal Turn

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How many trenchant observations can one essay contain? The answer is "enviably many" if the subject is the purview of contemporary American sociology of education and the author is Steven Brint, at the end of his term as chair of the American Sociological Association section of the same name. While other scholars have leveled similar charges that our field is diminished by its overriding concerns with educational achievement and access, studied quantitatively, Brint's piece is resonant because it covers so much ground in such short order, and he doesn't sound like he has a case of sour grapes. He just thinks that we can do better in the future.

Several of Brint's articulations are powerful: We are more a sociology of schooling than we are of education. We focus more on how society shapes education than how education shapes societal forces. We are drawn more to the study of K–12 than to the study of higher education. Because most of my own work is at odds with what Brint calls the "collective mind" of sociology of education, from content to methods, I'd like to offer a few observations in kind.

First, to Brint's call for more culture, more society, and more higher education (preferably in combination), I would argue that in the years since this essay was published, things have changed quite dramatically, if not in article form, then at least in books. Over the past five years, Mitchell Stevens, Ann Mullen, Jenny Stuber, Ruben Gatzambide-Fernández, Shamus Khan, Joseph Soares, Neil Gross, Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, Kate Wood, and I, among others, have turned our gaze to college campuses (or, in two of these cases, elite boarding schools) and, in varying ways, have studied how organizational and cultural features of campuses indelibly shape the people who study on them, with attendant larger social consequences.

Although inequality in access and outcomes is never far from the surface in these studies (I am quite certain that the concept of "reproduction of advantage" is used by all, to a greater or lesser extent), these authors come at stratification from unconventional directions and are centrally concerned with the mechanisms and processes by which education produces *multiple types of selves*. Conservatives become right in distinctive ways; affluent undergraduates become voracious partiers; prep students become meritocratically elite; large public university students go adrift. Authors in this group look at the multiple levels of meaning that inform students' understandings of themselves (from the most micro of their family background to the most macro of popular culture images of the "typical American college experience"), and they cast an especially probing eye to the distinctive organizational arrangements on campuses (what we might call the meso level) that enable and constrain possibilities for certain types of transformation or enhancement. They also look, for the most part, at how these understandings are shared culture, created in interaction with others.

In his book *Privilege*, for example, Khan (2010) tells us of the hierarchical chapel seating at St. Paul's School that helps students know their rightful place in the pecking order, no matter their humble or elite origins. In *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013) talk about the easy majors and housing options offered by Midwest U that enable upper-middle-

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class young women to dominate the social scene while also reproducing social inequality. Binder and Wood (2012), in *Becoming Right*, show that an atomized large campus, Western Public University, with its impersonal class registration policies, large lecture halls, and mostly off campus housing, creates the conditions for a more provocative style of conservatism, while at Eastern Elite University, a closely knit campus of eminently talented youth and faculty members obligates conservative students to more civilly engage peers in their "special bubble." Cultural understandings of "who we are on this campus" and the organizational features that structure students' daily lives bolster particular meanings shared by students. Graduates of these educational settings—organizationally produced selves intact—then graduate into society and shape it.

My second observation is that, clearly, these works are sociology of education, and some are celebrated as such (Stevens's book *Creating a Class*, for example, won the section's Pierre Bourdieu best book award). But the authors named above, with a few exceptions, do not frequently show up in the pages of *Sociology of Education*, and indeed, there is a sense among many in the group of being outside the mainstream. All of these authors, like most sociologists of education, would say that they study education *and* something else. The difference is that for this group, education might come after the "and," not before. For me, it is culture, political sociology, organizations, *and* education—a reflection of my sense that sociology of education, *in the main*, is interested in other things.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is movement afoot, with Steve Brint's active participation, to conjure education more fully into the sociological enterprise among both those who self-identify as sociologists of education (Jal Mehta, Scott Davies, Pam Walters, Michael Olneck, Doug Downey, many of the authors named above) with those who traditionally have not but whose work clearly benefits educational studies (Michele Lamont, John Skrentny, Mike Sauder). As one of the incoming deputy editors of the journal for 2013 to 2016, and as the 2014–2015 chair-elect of the sociology of education section, I look forward to continued mobilization toward a more expansive and inclusive field of study.

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